

Healing Old Wounds

When I was a kid, money was scarce. My parents worked long hours to pay the bills. They were gone a lot and when they were home, they were often tired and irritable. I somehow got the idea that their absence and cranky moods were my fault. My response was to think that there was something wrong with me. I believed that if only I could be smart enough, cute enough, or good enough, my parents would love me and wouldn't be so cranky all the time. My brother, whose favorite form of entertainment was picking on me, honed in on these insecurities and worked them for all they were worth. When the mood hit, he picked at me, pushing my buttons until I exploded into a temper tantrum or tears. It was as if I were a puppet and he were a marionette pulling all the strings. I tried all sorts of things to stop his behavior. I ignored him, like my parents suggested. I hit him. I did sneaky things like putting Comet on his toothbrush and spraying perfume on his clothes. Nothing worked because I still held fiercely to the belief that there was something wrong with me.

All of us have buttons that stir up our deepest insecurities and tug at old wounds that haven't been healed. When someone, especially someone who's close to us, pushes one of these buttons, it feels awful. We usually deal with these feelings by either withdrawing and shutting down, or lashing out. When we withdraw, we often make things worse by engaging in escapist activities to avoid experiencing our feelings such as gambling, drinking, smoking, eating, shopping, playing video games, surfing the internet, getting incredibly busy and/or watching TV. The price of escape is high. We risk addiction, financial problems, health problems, and simply not attending to things we need to get done. Lashing out causes its own set of problems because when we say hurtful things, either with our words, actions or tone of voice, we damage relationships and make the love and intimacy that we crave that much further out of reach.

We respond this way because when a button gets pushed, we feel vulnerable and afraid. And rather than taking a breath and acknowledging that we feel vulnerable, we put up our defenses. Caught in the grip of emotions, we may not even know what that we're feeling triggered. We just react reflexively.

At some level, these defenses work because they give us a sense of internal security. When we withdraw or lash out, we feel like we're back in control and therefore less vulnerable. Unfortunately, the defenses don't really work in the long run. They just escalate the original issue, create new problems and vulnerabilities for us and do nothing to lessen our insecurity or heal our wounds.

This is especially clear in romantic relationships. For example, your partner says, in a judgmental tone, "You're wearing new shoes." And you respond defensively, "It's my money. I can spend it however I want." Your partner is likely to escalate the conflict, perhaps saying something like, "It would be nice if you used more of *your* money to help pay the rent." If you withdraw, your partner is likely to get try to push you to respond and get angry when you don't. Either way you and your partner are likely to get into a fight. In the long run, these fights add up and eventually destroy the relationship.

At some point, preferably in the moment, but at least after there's been some sort of truce, it's important for both partners to take stock of their own issues. The temptation here is to take stock of your partner's issues and ignore your own. Don't do that. It will only make things worse. Rather than simply blaming the other person, you need to figure out which of your buttons got pushed and trace that back to the source wound or insecurity. If you have skillfully defended yourself against vulnerability for a long time, you may need to see a counselor or therapist to help you do this. Once you figure out the source of your old wounds and insecurities, you need to work towards healing them so that they don't get activated over and over again and ultimately lead to the dissolution of relationships.

Unfortunately, old wounds and insecurities often take a long time to heal. In the meantime, it's important for both partners to learn to respond differently when buttons get pushed. But again, you can only focus on you. You can't, no matter how hard you try, make your partner change his or her patterns. Awareness is the first step to changing your response patterns. You need to notice when you feel triggered and have an urge to act out or react defensively. The second step is to stop your defensive reflex reaction. Instead of following your reflexive impulse, take a breath (maybe two or three depending on how triggered you feel), and then comment on what you are feeling in a neutral tone of voice. For example, if you feel an urge to say, in a judgmental tone, "You're wearing new shoes." Rather than giving in to your impulse, tell your partner, "I notice that you got a new pair of shoes and I feel an urge to judge you because _____." This opens the door for your partner to respond with compassion and in a non-defensive way. If you are the receiving end of your partner's judgmental tone about the shoes, rather than responding defensively, let yourself be vulnerable. Tell your partner, "When you made the comment about my new shoes, I felt an urge to snap back at you because I felt judged." Ideally, this non-defensive reaction will help your partner to open up to his or her own insecurities. He or she might say something like, "I'm sorry. I have a hard time spending money on myself. We never had money when I was growing up, and spending money on things that weren't absolute necessities was bad." You can deepen the level of intimacy by adding your own vulnerability, "When I was a child, I never got to buy expensive shoes. We always had to buy inexpensive shoes that weren't comfortable. I felt like I wasn't worth much. I know that these shoes were sort of expensive, but they make me feel special." The beauty of this approach to buttons is that even if your partner doesn't really want to explore his or her issues, by changing your response, you will change the outcome. It may not be the outcome that you want, but it will at least be different.

We all have wounds and insecurities, and we all find ways to protect ourselves from the vulnerable feelings that these wounds and insecurities trigger. Over time, our protective strategies can cause significant problems in all areas of our lives, especially in our intimate relationships. In order to move forward in life, we need to name these wounds, work towards healing them and adopt healthier responses when our buttons get pushed.

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